

DATE: July 12, 1974

TO: The Director

FROM: Acting NIO/SEA

SUBJECT: Political Implications of Souvanna
Phouma's Heart Attack

REMARKS:

The attached, prepared at the request of
the NSC Staff, was drafted by OCI and
coordinated within the Agency.

B. E. Layton

Attachment

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July 12, 1974

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Political Implications of Souvanna Phouma's Heart Attack

1. Prime Minister Souvanna's reported heart attack poses a serious threat to the stability and perhaps even the viability of the coalition government in Laos. We have no details concerning his condition other than that it has been described as "serious." Souvanna does have a history of heart difficulty and is also a diabetic, which could complicate his chances for recovery.
2. The immediate danger in the situation lies in the possibility of nervous over-reaction by either the Vientiane or Pathet Lao side. Information and misinformation regarding Souvanna's condition and the intentions of the Communists and the right-wing is bound to spread quickly through Vientiane's rumor mills. A prognosis of full or partial recovery will, of course, ease the paranoia within both camps, but until Souvanna's condition stabilizes the situation in Vientiane will likely remain tense.
3. An incapacitated Souvanna -- but one who can still make some decisions -- would be the best solution. Both sides in the coalition structure almost certainly would be willing to live with such a situation, at least until it could be determined whether or not Souvanna would eventually be able to resume some semblance of active political life. Without Souvanna actively at the helm and serving as an arbiter between the Pathet Lao and the non-Communists, however, bureaucratic paralysis is likely to grip the government.
4. If Souvanna should die, the succession situation will be messy. Under the current constitution, the King would be called on to designate a new prime minister from within the cabinet. The prime minister-designate would then have to be approved by the National Assembly. Just this week, however, Souvanna ruled that the dormant rightist-controlled assembly should be dissolved. The Communists, who backed this decision strongly, would reject any effort to reverse that decision now.

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5. In the present situation, however, personalities are more important than procedures. There now appear to be four contenders for Souvanna's mantle. The least likely is Deputy Premier Leuam Insiengmay, who recently has become the unofficial head of the new non-Communist political front being organized in Vientiane. A moderate conservative, Leuam has not always been on the best of terms with Souvanna but has maintained a reasonably cooperative relationship with him for the past several years. Like other Lao rightists, he is unenthusiastic about Communist participation in the government. Leuam is not an effective leader and previously has displayed little interest in political power.

6. The other deputy premier is Lao Communist Phoumi Vongvichit, who also serves as foreign minister. Phoumi is the ranking Communist in the cabinet and the senior ideologist of the Lao Communist movement. Able and articulate, he has served as an effective spokesman for Pather Lao interests in the coalition cabinet.

7. A third candidate is a well-known neutralist, Interior Minister Pheng Phongsavan. Pheng is a longtime associate of Souvanna and served as the prime minister's chief negotiator during the protracted Lao negotiations. Pheng is politically ambitious, and he apparently views himself as Souvanna's political heir. Pheng has tried to stay on good terms with both the Communists and the Western powers. Pheng is a controversial figure, however, and would find it hard to overcome opposition among civilian and military rightists, who suspect him of harboring pro-Communist views. The King reportedly also believes that Pheng is an untrustworthy and corrupt man whose actions are detrimental to the country's best interests.

8. Last, but certainly not least, is Souvanna's half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong. The nominal head of the Pathet Lao and the chairman of the Advisory Political Council, Souphanouvong is perhaps the best known political figure in Laos after Souvanna. He is a sophisticated politician and probably believes himself to be the logical replacement for Souvanna. Souphanouvong, however, would be unacceptable to the non-Communists.

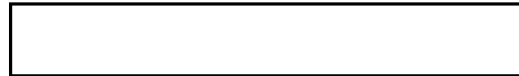
9. Of these four, Pheng would appear to be the front runner -- if only because he is a neutral and like Souvanna has had long experience in dealing with both sides. In any event, the final choice may be dictated by Souvanna -- provided he is willing and able to name a successor. If not, then the King may have to step into the breach and appoint a new prime

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minister -- without any reference to the cabinet or to the defunct assembly. It is always possible that the King himself might serve as the interim head of government until the two sides could find a mutually agreeable successor. The King, however, has a distaste for politics and probably would play such a role only as a last resort.



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